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ABSTRACT

Assessment of counselor performance is directly linked to assessment of counseling outcomes because counseling outcome is contingent upon counselor performance. Thus, the assessment of counseling outcome literature is the general context for the more specific literature on assessment of counselor performance. Historically, counselor performance has been assessed primarily in regard to actual counseling service rendered through assessments by counselors, clients, or external evaluators. Each of these areas is examined. Recently, non-counseling activities also have been assessed as part of the overall evaluation of counselor performance. Good assessment involves multiple measurements of whatever is being assessed. There are literally hundreds of assessment instruments and techniques available to assess various facets of counselor performance. Ironically, however, some experts have suggested that there are too many measures of counselor performance. Counselor performance assessment will be enhanced when assessments are clearly and cogently described and are used within an effective conceptual scheme. Additionally, assessments used need to fulfill accepted psychometric quality criteria. (JBJ)

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by Larry C. Loesch

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ERIC DIGEST

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Assessment of Counselor Performance

Larry C. Loesch

Overview

Assessment of counselor performance is directly linked to assessment of counseling outcome because, presumably, counseling outcome is contingent upon counselor performance. Thus, the assessment of counseling outcome literature is the general context for the more specific literature on assessment of counselor performance, and the same major themes are evident in both arenas. Historically, counselor performance has been assessed, either directly or *vis-a-vis* outcome, primarily in regard to actual *counseling* service rendered through assessments by counselors themselves, their clients, or external evaluators. However, recently, non-counseling activities also have been assessed as part of the overall evaluation of counselor performance.

Many methodologies have been used to assess counselor performance, including assessments such as interviews, linguistic content analyses, simulations, self-reports, applications of behavioral criteria, and rating scales. The focus of these assessments has ranged from the global to the specific. Rating scales are the most commonly used method, but no assessment procedure has emerged as most psychometrically appropriate, reliable, valid, or effective.

Counselors' Self-Assessments

The (Rogerian) premise that effective counseling necessitates substantial emotional congruence between counselor and client is widely espoused in the counseling profession. The highly personal nature of such emotional congruence suggests that the counselor is the best person to assess it. Thus, a variety of methods, such as "learning diaries," self-rating scales, or audiotaped "introspective dialogues," have been used to allow counselors to indicate the degree to which they have achieved emotional congruence with their clients.

Counselor self-assessments are popular among counselors, and arguably valuable, for purposes of self development and improvement. However, because of their subjectivity, their results rarely have been generalizable. Also, the methodologies generally have not withstood psychometric scrutiny. Therefore, counselor self-assessments are not widely used for effective assessment of counselor performance.

Assessments by Clients

Because counseling is *for* the client, it is a reasonable assertion that the client is the person best able to assess the degree to which the counselor has performed effectively. The credence of this assertion is evident in that client assessment of counselor performance is widely used and many methodologies have been developed to facilitate it. In general, clients have been requested to assess counselor performance in regard to the counselor being or behaving in a helpful way or the degree of the client's personal change.

A counselor's "helpfulness" has been most frequently assessed by clients through use of post-counseling "debriefing" interviews or rating scales. Typically assessed is the client's perceptions of the counselor's personal dynamics (e.g., degree of caring) or actions or behaviors which were helpful. The focus has often been on the latter, but some suggest it should be on the former (Herman, 1993).

Some rating scales have been developed to allow clients to assess counselors' personal dynamics. However, most are intended to allow client evaluation of the extent to which the counselor engaged in behaviors (particularly verbalizations) presumed or established to be related to counseling effectiveness. Some of these instruments have been shown to have quite good psychometric properties. Quality issues aside, however, use of rating scales completed by clients is one of the two most common methods of assessment of counselor performance.

Client self-assessment of change as an indicator of counselor performance typically has involved commentary, ratings, or self or other reported behavior changes. Unfortunately, however, these procedures have been used only infrequently for assessment of counselor performance, probably because the best data are obtained some time after counseling has been terminated.

Assessments by External Evaluators

Assessment of counselor performance by persons external to the counseling relationship is by far the most frequently used approach. The obvious advantage of such assessments is greater objectivity. In addition, external assessments usually are psychologically and behaviorally less intrusive, particularly if the assessments are applied

to audio or video tape-recorded counseling. External assessments also may be more practical because they are more easily applied to different types of counseling (e.g., individual, group, or family) or specific counseling contexts (e.g., see Ponterotto, Rieger, Barrett, & Sparks, 1994).

A wide variety of external assessment methodologies have been employed, including some only infrequentlyused in the counseling profession such as content analyses, critical incident techniques, or computer simulations (McLeod, 1992). However, rating scales again are the most frequently used assessment method. Rating scales have been developed to assess many different aspects of counselor performance, but most are focused upon the frequency and/or effectiveness of counselors' use of specific and behaviorally defined counseling skills.

The results of external assessments of counselor performance have been used in the context of both formative and summative evaluations. In the formative context, rating scales completed by counselors' supervisors, peers-in-training, or professional colleagues are often used on some regularly scheduled basis to provide process or skill development feedback to the counselors assessed. In the summative context, results from rating scales completed by supervisors, colleagues, or researchers are often used for program or personnel evaluation or research purposes.

Assessment of Non-Counseling Functions

The most recent trend in assessment of counselor performance has been to broaden the perspective on what it means to be an effective counselor, that is, to acknowledge that there is more to being a good counselor than just counseling skill (Bell, 1990). Assessments within this perspective encompass both actual counseling performance and other activities in which professional counselors engage. Assessments in the latter regard typically address activities such as diagnosis, case management, treatment planning, consultation, professional development, research, materials development, and interprofessional communications. These non-counseling components of counselor performance are typically assessed through use of rating scales by external evaluators. However, alternatives such as portfolio assessment or service recipient evaluations apparently are gaining favor.

Conclusion

It has long been recognized that good assessment involves multiple measurements of whatever is being assessed, and this principle has been recognized in regard to the assessment of counselor performance (Ridgway, 1990). There are literally hundreds of assessment instruments and techniques available to assess various facets of counselor performance. Therefore, it is not difficult to fulfill the multiple measurement criterion. Ironically, however, some experts have suggested that there are *too many* measures of counselor performance, a problem resulting from the many situation-specific assessment devices that have been developed. Most of these assessments are not derived from clearly defined constructs, are narrow in focus, and lack psychometric quality. Thus, comparability across measurements is restricted and generalizability across situations is limited.

The assessment of counselor performance will be enhanced when assessments are clearly and cogently described (Meier & Davis, 1990) and are used within an effective conceptual (evaluation) scheme (Lambert, Ogles, & Masters, 1992). Even more importantly, however, truly effective counselor performance assessment will be achieved when the assessments used fulfill accepted psychometric quality criteria (McLeod, 1992).

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